

Research and Evaluation Activities in USDA

From the Economic Research Service

Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Small Grants Program

Executive Summaries of 1998 Research Grants

Since their origins in the 1930's, food assistance programs—Food Stamps, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the school meals program, and others—have been a major component of public assistance to the poor. Food assistance, as well as nutrition assistance, has become increasingly important to the social safety net as a result of welfare reform. To stimulate new research on these programs and to broaden the participation of social science scholars in food and nutrition assistance research, the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) partnered with five academic institutions and research institutes in 1998 to establish the Small Grants Program for Food and Nutrition Assistance Research. ERS and the partner institutions competitively award small grants for 1-year research projects. One of the five partner-institutions is the American Indian Studies Program (AISP) at the University of Arizona (web address: <http://w3.arizona.edu/~aisp/projects.html>). AISP operates the only PhD program in Native American Studies in the United States and maintains close relationships to the land grant tribal colleges. AISP works with scholars at tribal colleges and elsewhere to support research addressing the unique position and problems of Native Americans with respect to food assistance. The

following abstracts summarize the findings of the first set of small grants awarded by AISP, in the fall of 1998. For a listing of all projects funded and research findings to date, see www.ers.usda.gov.

The Variety, Affordability, and Availability of Healthful Foods at Convenience Stores and Trading Posts on the Navajo Reservation

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A basic assumption of health and nutrition education programs is that foods being promoted will be available. On the Navajo reservation, where the nearest source for groceries may be a trading post or convenience store, this assumption may not be valid. To test this assumption, Dine Tribal College staff and students, in partnership with the University of New Mexico, developed and administered a 69-item food inventory at rural trading posts and convenience stores across the three States encompassing the Navajo reservation. The food inventory included only “healthful foods” such as fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and lean meat. Interviewers asked store managers open-ended questions about their primary customers and foods most commonly sold. The sample included a total of 48 stores, with one large grocery store for comparison. Individual foods were collapsed into broad food categories.

The authors used analysis of variance to determine differences in food categories by State, type, and distance

of store from a major grocery store. Seventy-five percent of store owners reported that local people were their primary customers, and 53 percent reported that “junk food” is the food most commonly sold, followed by 19 percent reporting staples. All but five stores had at least one type of fresh fruit or vegetable available; the mean number of these items available was 9. Only four stores had 1-percent milk, and six stores had skim milk available. Ninety percent of the stores accepted WIC stamps, and these stores had whole-grain cereals, fruit juices, and low-fat string cheese available. There were no differences in food availability by type of store or distance from a major grocery store. However, the number of fresh fruits and vegetables and total variety differed significantly across States. Their results show that the number of healthful foods available throughout the reservation is limited, and that store owners would make more of such foods available if they were demanded.

The Impact of Welfare Reform on Food Assistance Programs on American Indian Reservations: The Northern Cheyenne Case Study

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The goal of this research project was to identify and evaluate the effects of recent welfare reforms, particularly reforms related to food assistance programs, in the Northern Cheyenne Nation. The report documents the recent experiences of food assistance

programs and their clients and clarifies how recent welfare reforms affect food assistance and other service needs of Northern Cheyenne residents. Davis et al. present historical, demographic, and cultural information about the Northern Cheyenne Nation that is useful for understanding current conditions as well as the significance of food assistance programs. They report on the nature of the current programs, the views of the program directors, and client experiences with the food programs. They provide analysis of their findings and a discussion of policy implications.

The authors' analyses reveal effects of changes in the food assistance program on Northern Cheyenne cultural and social life, as well as on the range of formal and informal services and resources—the local safety net—to which economically vulnerable Cheyenne have access. Cultural effects can be seen in the struggle of tribal members to uphold one of their central values: like many other American Indian groups, the Northern Cheyenne place a high priority on sharing resources with both family and non-family to ensure survival. Prevalence of the value placed on sharing and caring for others is evident in the low to nonexistent level of homelessness on this reservation. It is also evident in the everyday actions of individuals who share food with those in need, regardless of how much or how little they have. However, as the numbers needing food assistance increase, the ability of families and the community to care for them is strained.

The authors also show that despite the significance of food assistance programs for increasing well-being, there are important obstacles for individuals attempting to access food assistance. Poor families living in remote reservation areas must make and get to appointments with program

personnel to receive the benefits for which they qualify. Lack of transportation or of gas money for others to drive them, and a lack of telephones are the most frequently cited problems. The considerable paperwork required of food stamp and other program recipients and the complexity of the system are often difficult to navigate for many individuals who are trying to establish and maintain eligibility for benefits. This is particularly the case for those who lack high school diplomas or whose first language is Cheyenne. Other common complaints include the lack of jobs, workplaces on or near the reservation where clients may complete required work hours, and inadequate childcare. The frequency of such problems indicates, despite their best efforts, the declining ability of local programs to serve their clients' needs adequately. A service gap leads to clients' discouragement and loss of confidence when they fall through the safety net.

Interviews with program directors and clients show that both groups understand the problems and gaps in services. However, constrained by regulations and limited resources, programs are often unable to make the changes needed to solve these problems. Such constraints leave many clients feeling frustrated and perceiving that programs are insensitive to their needs.

Because the Cheyenne are relatively representative of tribal populations in the Plains and elsewhere, this study presents useful insights about the effect of welfare reform on food assistance programs and other elements of the social safety net operating in many reservation communities. Findings of the study indicate the importance of examining the intricacies of clients' experiences with food assistance programs, the complexity of food programs, and the relationship of food

programs to the whole range of formal and informal resources on which the Northern Cheyenne rely.

Federal Food Programs, Traditional Foods and the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Nations of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation

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Eating habits and food preparation among the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine peoples have changed dramatically since the establishment of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation and the introduction of Federal food distribution programs on the reservation. This project documented such changes from the perspective of tribal elders, community members, and associated service providers. Data were collected from both men and women over the age of 50 through a survey designed by Fort Belknap College's (FBC) principal investigator, a consultant, and three student researchers who were graduates of FBC. The survey was administered in and around Fort Belknap Indian Reservation communities during the summer of 1999. Survey results identify various relationships between past and present Federal food distribution programs and the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine people's traditional practices of hunting, gathering, preparing, and preserving food.

Assessment of Food Concerns, Nutrition Knowledge, and Food Security of Oglala Lakota College Students on the Pine Ridge Reservation

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For this project, researchers adapted a survey developed by the South Dakota State University Department of Nutrition and Food Science to assess food concerns, nutrition knowledge, and food insecurity on the Pine Ridge Reservation. They interviewed students at five Oglala Lakota College (OLC) sites on the reservation. The interviews, conducted in 1999, included general demographic background questions, multipart interest/needs questions, questions related to current food understanding, and questions related to food adequacy.

Overall, the survey results show OLC students are five times more likely to be food insecure than the national average of 3.5 percent reported by the Economic Research Service for the 1996-98 period. The college needs to do further research to see whether this level of food insecurity affects academic performance. Students from the Wounded Knee College Center were eight times more likely to be food insecure than the national average. At the Pine Ridge College Center, 30 percent of the students stated that they consumed the same thing for several days in a row because they have only a few different kinds of food on hand and don't have money to buy more. This result was surprising because the Pine Ridge College Center houses the largest supermarket on the reservation and is located within 2 miles of two other grocery stores.

"Feeding self and family" was the primary concern of OLC students, with employment and housing being tied for second place for needs/interests. Employment was the greatest financial need, with "feeding self and family" second. Parents were the number one source of information for feeding students and family; second was a dietitian or nutritionist. Less than 10 percent of OLC students used USDA extension programs for information.

Parents were ranked the highest (70 percent) in terms of trustworthiness of the information provided.

Thirty-three percent of OLC students surveyed could not pick out which package of chicken was the best buy. Over 12 percent of OLC students surveyed did not understand why hot foods should be kept hot and cold foods cold. Over 86 percent did not know how many daily servings of bread, cereal, rice, and pasta are recommended for adults, teens, and children. Sixteen percent stated incorrectly that physical activity did not count unless you worked up a sweat. Also, 12.4 percent did not know that some form of physical activity is needed at least four times per week for overall good health.

The authors suggest that the new extension education program in holistic human health at OLC could coordinate educational activities to improve OLC students' knowledge of nutrition and health issues identified in the survey, with assistance from other land grant universities.

Dietary Choices and Weight Control Practices Among Cheyenne River Lakota Households

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This study describes the prevailing dietary choices and weight control practices among Cheyenne River Lakota households. The use of food assistance programs and food sources on the reservation is also examined. A standardized questionnaire and in-person interviews were used to survey a random sample of Cheyenne River Lakota households during the summer of 1999. Follow-up interviews on a random subsample of households helped to verify the questionnaire and

sought further information on preferences for weight control programs.

A total of 216 households participated in the survey. High-fat foods consumed most frequently included butter/margarine (35 percent >5 times per week), potato and corn chips (29 percent >5 times per week), cheese (27 percent >5 times per week), and hot dogs, bologna, and luncheon meats (26 percent >5 times per week). Few reported consuming fruits (11 percent >5 times per week) or vegetables (18 percent >5 times per week) on a daily basis. Sweetened beverages were consumed frequently, including regular pop (43 percent >5 times per week) and Kool-Aid® or punch (39 percent >5 times per week).

Most respondents engaged in mild exercise for at least 30 minutes 3 times per week or more (78 percent). Weight loss or maintenance techniques used frequently included increasing activity levels (59 percent), eating more fruits and vegetables (76 percent), eating less fatty foods (65 percent), eating less sweets (74 percent), and reducing the amount of total food consumed (70 percent). Most individuals (64 percent) were favorable to joining a program that promotes healthy diet and exercise. Major barriers to exercise included lack of time (54 percent) and medical reasons or disabilities (42 percent). Barriers to eating healthy foods included higher costs (50 percent) and unpopularity with the family (40 percent). The authors conclude that nutrition and weight control programs are needed to address these reported barriers and provide incentives for increased participation.